

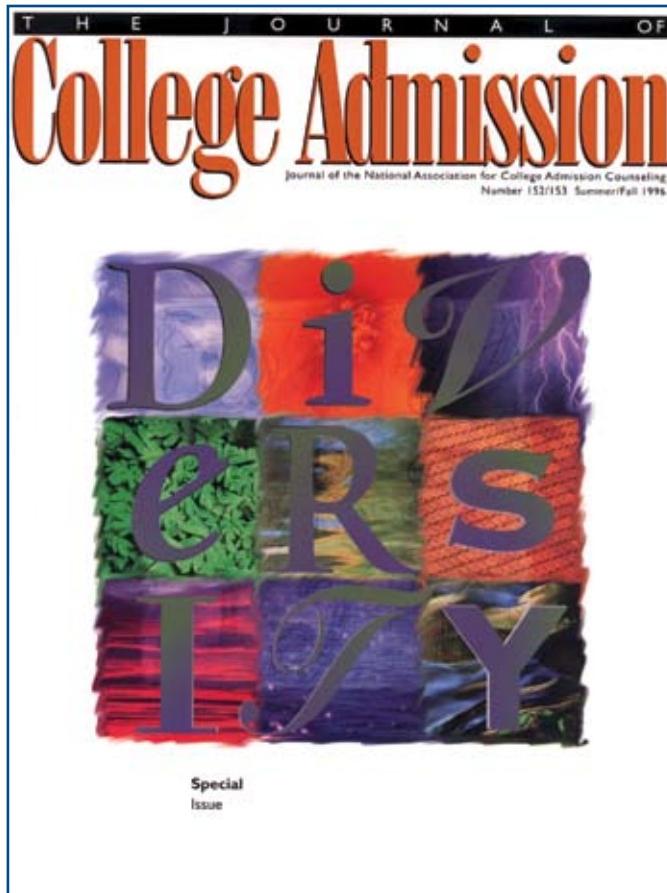
Hidden Disabilities:

Another Diverse Population

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This article is from
the *Journal of College
Admission's* Special Diversity
Issue, which in its entirety,
won the 1997 Muir Award.

Number 152/153
Summer/Fall 1994



ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE:

"I urge students with learning disabilities and their families to demand the services they need and to be patient with those of us in the education establishment as we seek to understand. I also encourage educators at all levels to be sensitive to and aware of these individuals as resources and work diligently with them to provide educational opportunity to all."

Walking into my 3rd grade classroom one would see:

a chalkboard facing the door
12 desks facing the chalkboard

a teacher's desk with a big
red apple on it
and a reading corner far to
the right past
the teacher's desk

Walking into my 3rd grade
classroom one would hear:
12 kids talking, laughing
and learning together
12 students learning how
to spell, read and
write

But if one would look
closer, one would see,
1 single child
1 lonely single child not
laughing or talking
1 child just sitting there, in
the middle of the
classroom, with her head
on her desk
That child is me

Deborah

Senior creative writing class

Misconception

Individuals with multiple learning disabilities should not consider college as an option.

Deborah was diagnosed at the age of two with severe multiple learning disabilities followed by a negative prognosis. All the professional diagnosticians did not believe that an academic future would be possible for Deborah; a traditional elementary or high school experience and college were never discussed with even a glimmer of hope. Today, Deborah is completing her junior year in college. She is also on the dean's list and is researching graduate school options. Deborah is one of the fortunate students who had supportive parents, excellent academic assistance and fine college guidance. Multiple learning disabilities are not a life sentence to being tracked out of a postsecondary educational experience. Deborah has come a long way, but the rest of us still have a long way to go.

I am reminded about a childhood game by Dr. Richard Lavoie.¹ Begin a story about anything and say the first four lines. Now pretend you are the next person to carry on the story, and add four more lines. Now it is the third person's turn, but let's change the rules. Continue the story, but you cannot use any words that contain the letter "N." You are probably slowly continuing the story, but the story line has been downgraded to very short, unimaginative and rather boring words.

This drill requires a compensatory strategy to process words for the game. For many of us this is not a difficult task and certainly not too stressful or to frustrating. However, consider the 10 percent of our college-bound population with diagnosed learning disabilities, many of whom must contend with this type of language processing deficit on a daily basis. These are students with learning disabilities, occupying seats in high schools and colleges all over the country, and competing academically with peers who are learning-abled. This is a diverse population that has defied the odds, advocated for services and is just beginning to emerge as a group seeking higher education.

Misconception

The term "learning disability" is the same as "mental retardation" or "slower learner."

We've come a long way since 1960 when the term "learning disabled" was coined. Prior to that time students with hidden disabilities were often labeled retarded and tracked for options after high school that did not include college. As a matter of fact, this is evidence that learning disabilities have been understood for years:

- Charles Darwin was considered by his masters... "a very ordinary boy, rather below the common standard in intellect"

Multiple learning

disabilities are not a life sentence to being tracked out of a postsecondary educational experience.

- Albert Einstein did not speak until [the age of] four or read until [he was] seven. "His teacher described him as "mentally slow, unsociable and adrift forever in his foolish dreams"
- Louis Pasteur was only a mediocre pupil in undergraduate studies and ranked 15th out of 22 in chemistry
- Thomas Edison's teachers reported that he was too stupid to learn anything.²

Today, any one of these famous individuals probably would be diagnosed as having a learning disability.

More than nine percent of today's college freshmen (more than 140,000 students) report having a disability, and students with hidden disabilities (learning, attention deficit disorder and other health-related disabilities) account for more than half of all freshmen with disabilities. In 1988 fewer than 20,000 college students reported having a learning disability, and in 1994 this number rose to close to 50,000.³ The good news is that professionals are doing a better job of identifying and diagnosing students with learning disabilities. With earlier identification, students are developing compensatory skills and seeking higher education in greater numbers than ever before. The bad news is that the climate for individuals with hidden disabilities appears to be making a U-turn back to being less sensitive, more skeptical and less agreeable to giving students accommodations. While more students are being identified and labeled, more eyebrows are being raised from disbelievers.

Recently a major east coast university made one of the largest U-turns. According to an article in the *New York Times*, this university is requiring all enrolled students receiving accommodations for hidden disabilities to provide updated testing, re-certifying the disability and specifically listing all required accommodations. Previously, documentation had been required upon enrollment in order to receive services, but now these students have until the summer of 1996 to provide documentation of their disability that has been done in the last three years. For those who do not have current documentation, this could mean paying from \$500-\$1500 for retesting. "I was outraged," said a current junior, who is receiving accommodations including note-takers, extended time for tests and the opportunity to take tests in a

quiet room. "I was born with these disabilities, I'll die with them, and it's inane and unnecessary to ask us to go out and spend \$1,000 to be re-evaluated. They're not asking blind and deaf students to get recertification that they still can't see or hear. It feels like they're trying to make us uncomfortable because they don't believe learning disabilities are real."⁴

What are the laws protecting individuals with learning disabilities? Are all the students who are exhibiting characteristics of a learning disability being diagnosed? How are colleges handling applications from students who self-disclose a learning disability or other hidden disabilities? How level is the playing field for this diverse group of students?

Misconception

Learning disabilities do not exist if they are hidden.

The first formal definition of learning disabilities was written in 1968 and finally became Public Law 94-142. Ultimately the definition was revised many times to reflect the continuing awareness of the fact that learning disabilities are lifelong and do not appear in adulthood. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities revised the definition in 1988. It states that:

"Learning disabilities" is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders, manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance) or with intrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions of influences.⁵

Public Law 94-142 (The Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975) and amended by Public Law 101-476 (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990-IDEA and 1991-IDEA) is a federal statute that guarantees that all children are entitled to a multidisciplinary evaluation and appropriate assistance for a diagnosed learning disability.

Some of the students not meeting the criteria for services under PL 94-142 may be covered under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This act is a civil rights act that institutions or organizations receiving federal funding (this includes any institution receiving more than \$2,500 in grants, financial aid or

other federal assistance) may not discriminate against "otherwise qualified individuals solely on the basis of a disability" and must address the needs of children who are considered "handicapped." "Handicapped" is defined as a person who has physical or mental impairments which substantially limit a "major life activity" such as walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing and learning. This definition also includes attention deficit disorder with or without hyperactivity and learning disabilities.

According to Dr. Susan Vogel of Northern Illinois University, "the major underlying disorders in basic psychological processes include difficulties in discrimination (e.g., in perceiving differences between two similar but unlike sounds, words or symbols), in retaining what is heard or seen, and in expressing what one knows either through oral or written language."⁶

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and high school the
school district and
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learning disabilities.

Misconception

Individuals with attention deficit disorder are not protected by Section 504.

While the laws require identification, diagnosis and implementation of an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for students

in elementary school and high school, the laws are quite different in college. In elementary school and high school the school district and parents work as a team, but in college there are no parent advocates and no laws guaranteeing the right to a college education. Most college administrators and faculty have had very little experience with the laws and accommodations for learning disabilities. Jeanne Kincaid, an attorney specializing in this field, explains the law as it applies to colleges and universities. Section #504 protects individuals with disabilities from being excluded from participating in any programs or activity receiving federal financial assistance.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was written into law in 1993, provides greater protection to individuals with disabling conditions. According to Kincaid:

All conditions which entitled a student to receive special education while attending grade school or high school (e.g., mental retardation, learning disability, serious emotional disturbances, AIDS, cancer, alcohol or drug addiction [so long as the student is not a current user of unlawful drugs], environmental illness, attention deficit disorder [ADD/ADHD], diabetes, asthma, physical disabilities, behavior disorders, etc.) are examples of disabling conditions and provide the same entitlement in college.⁷

Therefore, it appears that Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD/ADHD) is covered by this law.

Misconception

Colleges can ask students about a learning disability on the application for admission.

How are colleges dealing with applications from students with learning disabilities? Colleges generally cannot make preadmission inquiries about disabilities. In cases involving the Office of Civil Rights, colleges have been cited for including questions on their application for admission that ask applicants if they have "any disability or handicap" that have adversely affected their academic record. They have even been cited for requesting applicants to check a box indicating interest in receiving information about disability services. Any question about disabilities on an application is generally prohibited.

Kincaid points out that "the only legitimate reasons for colleges to ask about an applicants disability on a college application are: 1) if a college has been cited in the past for discriminating against students with disabilities or 2) if a college is taking action to overcome the effects of not being able to participate in a federally-assisted program." However, she warns that "it is very difficult to separate the legitimate question from an illegal question."⁸ Some colleges have circumvented this situ-

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tion by encouraging qualified students with disabilities to apply for admission and by providing information about how students can learn about available services. Kincaid suggest that colleges should avoid checklists or any questions pertaining to disabilities. Colleges can provide information in the college viewbook as well as in the acceptance letter.

In addition, high school counselors can be very helpful in guiding students through the search and selection process. Many colleges require a separate application for a specific I.D. program. Somehow the existence of these specific services/programs needs to be conveyed to all students exploring appropriate postsecondary options. The problem arises when colleges do not provide information in published materials. This lack of information results in many successful college matches not taking place because students do not know if the college service and/or programs will match their individual needs, nor are they aware that special application procedures may be required.

This is somewhat of a double-edged sword. Since students cannot be prompted on applications to provide information about their hidden disabilities, they must know to self-disclose their disability, identify their needs and provide professional documentation. Yet, thousands of students will not disclose because of lack of information or fear that disclosure will negatively impact their chances of admission. Legally, institutions may not deny the student admission because of a self-disclosed disability if the student meets the academic qualifications for admission. Students aware of the importance of self-identification will want to self-disclose so that colleges may understand the academic challenges they have successfully navigated. They will also want to give some explanation of weaker performance in subject areas that impacted on their areas of deficit. Other diverse populations are often actively pursued for inclusion on college campuses. However, this diverse population of individuals

with hidden disabilities is often lacking good information about services, programs, accommodations and application procedures at the various colleges.

We have the laws, the providers, the individuals with disabilities, the believers, the converted and the skeptics. So how far have we really come? What are colleges doing to level the playing field? Among the 3,000 colleges and universities, there are hundreds of institutions that have special programs for students with learning disabilities or ADD/ADHD. How do those colleges determine which applicants to admit without fear of not being in compliance with the law? How are the applicants being assessed differently? Can it be true that there are actually colleges and universities that are comfortable putting their policies in writing and are actively seeking applicants with learning disabilities to admit to their institutions?

Misconception

Colleges may deny admission to applicants if they are unable to effectively accommodate the learning disability.

Students who have taken college admission tests under non-standardized conditions, (i.e., extended time, reader, taped, larger print) need to be advised that laws protect them against discrimination. Under #504 an institution may not:

- Make a pre-admission inquiry
- Use admission tests or criteria that inadequately measure academic qualification... because special provisions were not made
- Use admission standards that have the effect of discriminating on the basis of the disability
- Limit the number of students with disabilities admitted
- Restrict enrollment into certain colleges or majors based on disability
- Exclude a student with a disability from a course
- Counsel a student toward a more restrictive career
- Limit financial assistance or discriminate in administering scholarships, fellowships, internships or assistantships on the basis of disability
- Measure student achievement using models that adversely discriminate
- Establish rules and policies that may adversely affect students with disabilities.

Misconception

All learning disabilities are alike and require the same accommodations.

Once admitted and enrolled in college, students with learning disabilities or other hidden disabilities must provide appropriate documentation to the director of disability services and the

Once admitted and enrolled in college, students with learning disabilities or other hidden disabilities must provide appropriate documentation to the director of disability services and the institution must provide effective accommodations.

institution must provide effective accommodations. Documentation must demonstrate that the disability exists, how it affects the individual and what specific accommodations are required. According to Kincaid, examples of reasonable accommodations that institutions are expected to provide to ensure that the student receives an equal opportunity to participate may include:

- Additional time to complete tests, coursework or graduation
- Substitution of non-essential courses for degree requirements
- Adaptation of course instruction
- Tape recordings of classes; modification of test taking/performance evaluations.

Institutions of higher education must also provide auxiliary aids and services such as note takers, readers, taped text and scribes. According to Kincaid, "Colleges or universities are only obligated to provide tutorial services to non-disabled students." Kincaid points out that both public and private institutions must provide effective accommodations. However, "they are not required to provide academic adjustments or auxiliary aids and services if such provisions would fundamentally alter the nature of the program or when the academic requirements are essential to a program of study or to meet licensing prerequisites. An auxiliary aid may also be denied when the provision of such would place an "undue burden" on the institution (significant difficulty or expense)."⁹

Misconception

Students with learning disabilities must be dumb or lazy.

Michael Barron, director of admission at the University of Iowa, said, "Twenty-five years ago when I first became an admission officer at a medium-sized public university in Texas, my mentors and colleagues suggested to me that I would encounter applicants who had not performed well in high school. I was told to expect that some of those students would 'claim' to have a reading problem and others would actually use the term dyslexia. It seems that many of my admissions colleagues were somewhat dubious about the true extent of the disability.

It is with horror that I look back on those times when many of us simply discounted such students as just being lazy, dumb or underprepared.

We are blessed today by greater knowledge... also by compassionate understanding of these individuals who cope with one or more of the growing list of what we now call learning disabilities. Often these students exhibit superior intellectual capacity but lack the facility to mark the appropriate bubble or write an answer on paper in the prescribed time period. They are a resource that cannot be overlooked or swept aside by our application of some of the more odious and inappropriate labels used in the past.

...I am pleased to say that now there are many more of my colleagues who understand these needs and, working carefully with disabilities specialists and faculty, are developing ways to provide students with the opportunity for a higher education.

At the University of Iowa, the office of admission has a special relationship with the office of services for disabled students and has operated a very successful program of alternative admission consideration for such students. A diverse student body with a variety of talents, interests and backgrounds is necessary to truly deserve the label "university." Iowa welcomes applications from students with documented learning disabilities and/or attention deficit disorder."¹⁰

Misconception

Colleges must either have a structured program for students with learning disabilities or services are not provided.

There are hundreds of colleges and universities just like the University of Iowa that provide "special circumstance admission." These colleges do not have structured programs. Most do not charge a fee for services. However, they do assess applications from students with disabilities in a flexible manner and, if admitted, those students are provided guidance and advocacy to effective accommodations.

There are also colleges that offer specific structured programs for students with learning disabilities in which the number of students admitted is limited, additional fees are charged and often the admitted students sign a contract in order to participate in the program. These colleges are successful in their endeavors to provide a meaningful college experience for students who have learning disabilities. These programs are staffed by LD professionals, advisors and tutors. They provide workshops, equipment, advocacy, faculty in-services, and most importantly, a philosophy that exudes enthusiasm for these students. In addition, there are thousands of colleges and universities that do not have special programs or special admission procedures, but

reflect a concern or belief in the LD label and the basic services required to meet these students' needs.

Misconception

Faculty have the option to refuse to provide accommodations if they feel the request is unwarranted.

In the vast community of colleges and universities, there still exists those colleges that deny admission when they note a non-standardized test (even though students with broken arms can take a non-standardized test). There are also colleges that deny admission when students self-disclose because they feel they will be unable to provide the necessary accommodations. Others deny admission because their faculty will not cooperate with requested accommodations. There is also the perennial issue of graduation course requirements and whether students with specific disabilities should be able to request substitutions for courses that are not an essential part of their program or major. The Office of Civil Rights suggests applying the following standard test to this request:

- Did the student document a need for academic modifications?
- Was an academic adjustment necessary?
- Did the college provide an appropriate adjustment?
- Was the adjustment provided effective?

Its not always easy to determine if a course is essential to a particular degree—all colleges should have a procedure to allow students to request a waiver or substitution, but do they?

Misconception

Individuals receiving accommodations have an unfair advantage.

How far have we come? The NCAA is under attack for not having a policy that allows students with learning disabilities to meet the academic requirements for core courses. Some students with learning disabilities begin high school with a course load that could include some basic courses or even individualized special education courses. What should the policy be for students who need to take preliminary courses prior to enrolling in a demanding college preparatory curriculum?

Another situation involving the NCAA revolved around a student who was not diagnosed with a learning disability until after repeating grades one and three. Therefore, this student turned 19 while in high school and was found ineligible to participate in interscholastic athletics because the age limit is 18. What is fair in this situation?

Students are requesting extended time on graduation entrance exams, bar exams and other certification exams. Some colleges are willing to grant requests for special accommodations

and others are putting up a fight. "There is mass confusion over compliance that has resulted in lawsuits brought by students who claim that the colleges have violated ADA. Some professionals feel that rapid response is critical while others feel that most entrance exams are testing an understanding of information and not how fast the student can think."¹¹ The reality is that appropriate accommodations allow students with learning disabilities to compete with their peers on a level field.

There is clearer understanding of how to accommodate individuals with disabilities that are visible. However, this population of individuals with hidden disabilities is meeting resistance on many levels. One of the main reasons for resistance to accommodating these students is the fact that the documentation provided raises doubts as to its authenticity. Students identified and tested in elementary, junior high, or high school who receive services and are re-tested every three years according to the laws are not the problematic population. However, there are students who are privately tested, do not participate in services at school prior to college and are requesting accommodations based on this testing. There appears to be an underlying concern that some of this testing is "bought" for purposes of receiving special accommodations especially for taking the ACT/SAT. There are procedures in place to work with students who present outside testing to verify their testing results. Yet, with the numbers multiplying for identified or labeled students, the level of distrust appears to be growing.

The bad news, according to Dr. Noel Gregg at the University of Georgia, is, "the observation that despite more students being identified and labeled, individuals with learning disabilities are significantly underrepresented at colleges or universities." Approximately 50 percent of public school students with disabilities demonstrate a learning disability, and yet, only 25 percent of all students with disabilities in college indicate a learning disability. What happened to the other 25 percent? Perhaps they simply opted not to go to college. More troubling is the question of what will happen to the 25 percent currently electing to go on to college who will be confronted with a changing climate of disbelievers?¹²

Misconception

Claiming to have learning disabilities is just an excuse.

The U.S. Department of Education found in 1992 that 46 colleges had violated the rights of students or employees with disabilities.¹³ Some college professors still believe that learning disabilities are just an excuse used by students with little or no motivation. The lack of knowledge in many educators about learning disabilities is fueled by the general confusion of scientific proof about what causes learning disabilities.

In another survey released by the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation, there is evidence that misinformation about learn-

ing disabilities is causing these individuals to be discriminated against. The findings indicate that 89 percent of the respondents felt that adults with learning disabilities are humiliated and full of pain. Between 60 percent and 85 percent of the respondents questioned and between 61 percent and 91 percent of teachers questioned incorrectly identified mental retardation, blindness and emotional problems as the same as learning disabilities. Once these respondents were given an appropriate definition of learning disabilities, they understood the problems of discrimination. The poll was conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide.¹⁴

How far have we come? Never far enough. Individuals with learning disabilities have legal rights to accommodations in the workplace, but there is a fear of saying to a potential employer, "I need to advise you that I will need all instructions in written form," and expecting that potential employer to evaluate the applicant in a fair and equitable way.

"If you thought fear of failure at school was tough, how about fear of filling out application forms? Young adults with learning disabilities and/or attention deficit disorders need a well-organized strategy for landing a job, whether as a summer student or as a full-time worker."¹⁵ There are laws in place to protect individuals from having to answer any questions about their learning disability. However, in order to ultimately get accommodation, they are going to have to know how to be self-advocates. Once the individual self-discloses a learning disability, an employer may inquire about effective accommodations, but once again, the employer may not ask any questions about accommodations that are not related to the job responsibilities.

As educators, our work in assisting individuals with learning disabilities and other health-related disabilities must continue. We've come a long way, but the road is still filled with hidden barriers that will require education, advocacy and support. As Michael Barron stated so eloquently:

"While we are working to educate our colleagues, to modify our systems to accommodate these students, and to provide them with the opportunity to obtain the education that they desire, we also must begin to work as partners with industry. It will not be enough to provide an environment where an individual can complete a university degree and yet fail miserably in the world of work because of lack of understanding and inappropriate job placement procedures.

Our excuse at Iowa is that these students desperately want to succeed, and they want to stand on merits of their own achievements. To deny them the opportunity to be an asset at the highest level of their ability is to squander a valuable human

resource, creating an unnecessary and unwanted liability for society. I urge students with learning disabilities and their families to demand the services they need and to be patient with those of us in the education establishment as we seek to understand. I also encourage educators at all levels to be sensitive to and aware of these individuals as resources and work diligently with them to provide educational opportunity to all."¹⁶

Misconception

There are no accommodations that can effectively assist students who cannot remember, express thoughts, read, stay focused. Understand social cues, be organized or manage their time.

Students with learning disabilities have both strengths and weaknesses. While they may learn in unique ways, these differences do not imply that their capacity to learn is inferior. Therefore, it is not necessary to dilute the curriculum to assist these students, but to work with them to identify what accommodations are necessary to help them be successful. Learning disabilities are not curable, but there are many instructional interventions and compensatory strategies that can be used to help those with disabilities to master the coursework, such as:

- Tape recordings of lectures
- Note takers
- Use of computers
- Carbonless paper
- Multiple forms of presenting materials
- Quiet room for tests
- Share course outlines and notes
- Spell checkers
- Assignments in oral and written form
- Calculators
- Skills classes in note-taking/test-taking
- Tutoring
- Alternative test methods
- Time management classes
- Priority registration
- Course syllabus
- Extended time for tests/class assignments.

It is a very difficult task to cause an attitude adjustment for those who simply do not want to accept the fact that learning disabilities are real. Assisting students with learning disabilities on college campuses is a challenge, but not nearly as much of a challenge as it is for the students themselves to deal with the attitudes of disbelief they must confront from others. It is true that these students present cognitive deficits in areas necessary for college success. However, they are succeeding, and they are a population deserving encouragement, support, acceptance, and respect.

Recommended Readings

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